CHAPTER 16

Conclusion: A Forgotten Success

Ten years after Camp David a broader peace remains elusive.
William B. Quandt, National Security Council staff member, Carter administration[1]

Looking back from the perspective of nearly a decade, it is clear that for the Corps of Engineers the Israeli air base program was a significant success. Under the direction of Lt. Gen. John W. Morris, the Corps leadership eagerly pursued this mission in which they knew the organization must not fail. Maj. Gen. James Johnson and his North Atlantic Division staff in New York and the planners in Washington—Fred McNeeley, Lee Garrett, Bates Burnell, and the people who worked for them—jumped at the chance to get the highly visible risk-laden job for the Corps. Those who followed—Jack Gilkey, Dick Curl, Don O'Shei, Ben Lewis, John Wall, and the others—spent no time complaining about the difficult situation that had been thrust on them. They too appreciated the importance of the effort, and many thrived in the challenging, fast-paced environment. Morris' agency responded with the spirit that he sought in subordinates. Collectively, the Corps did not shy away from the opportunity to fail.

They did not fail. In fact, in conjunction with the other government and contractor participants in the program, they produced a remarkable success. The management plan that came out of the combined efforts of New York and Washington offices of the Corps got the program moving, and the cost estimates produced in the office of John Reimer turned out to be remarkably accurate. However, these estimates were not self-fulfilling. It was the management of John Wall and his staff along with the cooperation of the contractors that balanced the requirements of schedule, quality construction, and the budget to complete the program with only the smallest of overruns.

Success did not come easily. The complexity of the management scheme in Tel Aviv in combination with conflicts between organizations and the clashes of strong personalities did produce difficulties. But all of the participants acted in what they saw as the best interests of the mission, and the commitment of all to the goals of the program was never in doubt.

All knew that failure would have had far-reaching implications. The Carter administration's quest for peace between Israel and Egypt and in the Middle East at large would have been jeopardized had the Corps not succeeded. But the bases were completed, and the Israelis honored their historic commitment to withdraw from the Sinai peninsula. The Corps of Engineers added another major accomplishment to its list of huge construction projects and reaffirmed its ability to work in conjunction with private contractors in an environment that approximated mobilization for war. Military construction by the Corps of Engineers proved a valuable tool in the implementation of the nation's foreign policy.

The air base program was only the most prominent and most recent episode in the long history of post–World War II construction by the Corps of Engineers in the Middle East. From the early days of the cold war, the Corps supported American policy in the region with construction for American forces and for friendly governments. Most of the work was explicitly military, and early projects ranged from bases for American air forces along the southern shore of the Mediterranean in Libya and Morocco to a network of logistical, administrative, and tactical facilities for the shah's government in Iran. Engineer projects in the 1960s also included over five hundred miles of highways in Afghanistan—about one-third of that landlocked country's paved roads. Beginning around the same time and extending well into the 1980s, the Corps also managed a huge program in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, a multibillion-dollar complex of military and civil construction for several government ministries.[2]

So, by the time of Camp David, military construction was a tried and true albeit little known instrument of American policy in the region. But the connection of the air base work in the Negev to diplomacy was more explicit and immediate than in most cases. The project was tied directly to a specific diplomatic initiative rather than to long-range policy goals.

The air base program differed from American construction elsewhere in the region in other ways. These differences emanated from the specific policy goals that were involved and the contrast between Israel's level of maturation and that of other Middle East-

ern nations rather than from the special relationship between the United States and Israel. In other Middle Eastern locales, Corps projects contributed to development programs for societies on the road to modernization and diversification. But Israel was already a modern industrial nation, with a politically sophisticated and combative press and construction practices that Americans found idiosyncratic but conceded to be effective. This was not nation building, as the provision of infrastructure in developing countries is frequently called. In fact, in some respects something antithetical to nation building seemed to take place. The American presence, particularly because it was related to the withdrawal from the Sinai, represented a blow to Israeli national pride. Distress was especially acute in the building industry and crafts, which interlocked in the Histadrut labor federation. This unhappiness combined with the stress caused by the Portuguese workers in Negev towns to generate considerable negative publicity. It also underscored the difference between Israel and other Middle Eastern hosts of Corps projects as well as the distinctions between the political imperatives that drove the air base program and other Corps work in the region.

The most important questions about the air base program pertain to the ultimate result of the diplomacy that created the Corps mission in the Negev. What happened to the Camp David accords and the possibility of peace in the Middle East? On one hand, there is peace between Israel and Egypt, a peace that has seen some rocky times but still endures. However, Camp David was also and perhaps more importantly intended to serve as the basis for an overall regional peace and for resolution of the issues surrounding Palestinian nationality and territory. As a framework for regional peace, Camp David is a dead letter—repudiated by some, ignored by others, and supported by only a few.

Many Arab countries have firmly rejected further negotiations based on the Camp David accords. Most notable among these are Egypt itself, which was so instrumental in beginning the process, and Jordan, which has renounced its claims to its former territories on the West Bank of the Jordan River. They now seek solutions through a comprehensive international conference supported by the United States and the Soviet Union, the very approach that both Israel and the United States sought to avoid through the Camp David meetings. Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, who had pledged full support for Camp David when he succeeded Sadat, grew disenchanted when discussions of Palestinian autonomy collapsed early in the 1980s. He later rejected the Camp David formula for Palestinian autonomy as "a thing of the past whose time has ended." The Palestinian protests against Israeli occupa-

tion of the West Bank and Gaza, the *intifada* that started late in 1987 and raged through the following year and into 1989, reinforced the conviction of many that Camp David did not show the way to a solution that would guarantee an end to the occupation. Other Arab countries—among them Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Morocco, and Syria—shared this view.[3]

In Israel the Camp David accords still had strong official backing. Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir remained committed to Camp David at the end of 1988, perhaps because the accords had provided an excuse for his government to forestall meaningful negotiations regarding the future of Palestinians in the occupied territories. "We have made it clear to all potential partners," Shamir was reported as saying, "that we are committed to the Camp David accords and we will not change our position in this regard."[4]

Shamir's adamancy notwithstanding, the fate of the three key participants underscores the failure of the Camp David initiative as a framework for regional peace. Sadat, who risked so much to open communications with Israel, was assassinated in his own country and did not live to see the completion of the Israeli withdrawal from the Sinai. Begin, who welcomed the initiative, became a recluse after Israel's disastrous invasion of Lebanon in 1982 and the death of his wife. Carter, who brought the two together, was defeated in Ronald Reagan's landslide election in 1980. As Ambassador Samuel Lewis reflected, looking back in the mid-1980s, regional peace seemed "a lonely relic of shattered dreams." True, Israel and Egypt remained formally at peace, and that in itself was a substantial achievement "in a tormented region where peace is rare and warfare and terror seem endemic."[5] But on the tenth anniversary of Sadat's visit to Jerusalem, both countries felt "ambivalence and a sense of disappointment," according to Glenn Frankel of the *Washington Post.*[6] Gone was the sense of "the turning point," as former Israeli Foreign Minister Abba Eban called Sadat's dramatic 1977 gesture, when "the windows were opened and the air came rushing in."[7]

While Camp David has not quite been forgotten, and indeed should be remembered for bringing peace between Israel and Egypt, the air base program quickly disappeared from the public memory of even the American president who helped create it. The chronology in President Carter's memoir ignored the program entirely, moving from the March 1979 treaty to the November seizure of American citizens in Iran, without mention of the intervening establishment of the Near East Project Office. Similarly, his entry for April 1982 mentioned only the return of the Sinai and the dismantling of the settlements. There was nothing about the successful completion of base construction and attainment of initial oper-

ating capability by the treaty date, an accomplishment that made possible the Israeli relocation of defense facilities from the Sinai.[8]

The Palestinian uprising that began late in 1987 dispelled any doubt regarding the irrelevance of Camp David for resolution of the overarching regional conflict. For two years large-scale Palestinian protests swept through the Gaza strip and West Bank. While the uprising raged across the occupied territories, scholars in the United States noted the rejection of Camp David that the *intifada* reflected. William Quandt had been at Camp David as a member of President Carter's National Security Council staff in September 1978. Ten years later, in September 1988, he wrote that the "clear message [of the uprising] is that the Camp David formula of 'autonomy' and the idea of having Egypt or Jordan represent Palestinian interests are unacceptable."[9] New proposals and initiatives were required.[10]

So to a large extent, the Camp David accords were a failure. The Palestinian demand for a state remains at the heart of tensions in the Middle East. Yet the peace between Egypt and Israel has endured, and travel, communication, and commerce between the signatories continue. In fact, in the spring of 1989, with the final return to Egypt of Taba, a tiny slice of disputed Red Sea beach on the edge of the Sinai, prospects for an enduring peace seemed good.[11] That much still remains the legacy of Camp David and the air base program.

Many people deserve the credit, notably the leaders of the countries concerned, for their vision and commitment. But the men and women of the air base program—Israeli, American, Thai, Portuguese, and others—helped create the conditions that made peace possible. Working for the U.S. government, the Israeli government, contractors, and suppliers, they made the Israeli withdrawal from the Sinai and the ensuing peace between Israel and Egypt possible. Their efforts should not be forgotten.

Notes

1. *New York Times*, 17 Sep 88.

2. Very little has been written on the vast program of Middle Eastern construction carried out by the Corps of Engineers, except the lessons-learned publications cited in the introduction, a handful of articles in The *Military Engineer* by officers who participated in one project or another, and the inadequate histories of some of the engineer districts that carried out the work. Yet there is much to be learned from this program, on a wide range of subjects from desert construction methods to the nature of modernization efforts in the region and the extent of American support for the military establishments of Middle Eastern countries. The records of these endeavors are voluminous and are housed in several locations: successors of the districts and divisions that did the work, the research collections of the Office of History of the Corps of Engineers, and various parts of the National Archives system.

3. *New York Times*, 16 and 22 Feb 88.

4. *Washington Post*, 4 Nov 88 and 25 Mar 89.

5. *New York Times*, 23 Mar 86.

6. *Washington Post*, 19 Nov 87.

7. Ibid.

8. Jimmy Carter, *The Blood of Abraham* (Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 1985), pp. xviii–xix. David Shavit's *The United States in the Middle East: A Historical Dictionary* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1988) also fails to mention the Near East Project Office or its work.

9. *New York Times*, 17 Sep 88.

10. For some ideas by a distinguished journalist, see Thomas L. Friedman, "Proposals for Peace," *New York Times Magazine*, 30 October 1988.

11. *New York Times*, 27 Feb 89.